
LEGACY

PLANTING A SEED

By Jannette Jauregui



“I think about the kids and what we do to teach them about the history.... I think about a man I ran into who was a child in Vietnam during the war. He thanked me for saving his life. It wasn't a lost war.... We planted a seed.”

~Rey Frutos, Santa Paula

A class of no more than 25 kids from St. Sebastian School took their weekly walk from their Santa Paula campus to church for morning mass. It was an organized line led by one teacher, with another in the back, and parent volunteers in between, all ensuring the students' safety as they crossed each street along the half-mile route.

Standing on his porch with his infant grandson in his arms, Rey Frutos patiently waited as the students approached the sidewalk in front of his house. They all waved and greeted him with excited voices, but the most important wave for Frutos came from one of his granddaughters, located in the middle of line, who walked alongside her father, Alex Frutos, who was serving as a parent volunteer for the day.

The following week's walk would be the same, and Frutos would be on his porch waiting again for that wave.

Across town at Blanchard Elementary School are nearly 500 more students who run up to Frutos each time he walks onto the campus. They yell as loudly as they can, “Mr. Rey! Mr. Rey!,” and simultaneously hug the now retired outreach consultant, who ended his 38-year- career at Blanchard. The students look up to Mr. Rey as someone they can count on.

A role model. A hero.

A native of Santa Paula, Frutos' childhood was very much like so many students with whom he worked. With roots stemming from hard-working immigrants, Frutos' parents raised their 10 children with very little money in the bank, but with strong family values. His mother, Consuelo, worked in local packinghouses. His father, Jesus, began his career in agriculture and worked to become a union employee, holding positions in construction and carpentry, eventually owning his own business.

In the evenings and on weekends in the spring, Frutos would watch from his backyard on South 13th Street as his young peers, who were members of Santa Paula Little League, played in their after school games. He'd listen to each call that was made and to the distinctive echo of the bat as it hit the ball. With limited resources, Frutos wasn't able to join them on the field. But it didn't stop his love for the game.

In 1967, at nearly 18 years old, Frutos joined a men's fast-pitch league, finally allowing the opportunity to become a part of a baseball team. When he graduated from Santa Paula High School, Frutos began working for Weyerhaeuser, and then Shell Chemical in Ventura. He had also registered for selective service.

"I wasn't paying attention to what was going on," said Frutos, 66. "I didn't know anything about the war. You have to remember, I had never been outside of my safety zone in Ventura County."

But on Oct. 1, 1969, at almost 20 years old, that safety zone was interrupted. Frutos received his draft notice, and immediately reported to Los Angeles to board a bus headed to Central California and Fort Ord.

On April 10, 1970, after six months of training, which included armor reconnaissance at Fort Knox, Kent., Frutos and other members of the 11th Armored Cavalry, nicknamed "Blackhorse," reported to Oakland, Calif., and boarded another plane. This time they were headed to Vietnam.

Frutos spent 13 months on active duty in Vietnam, serving primarily in the Di An region, north of Saigon, and in Cambodia.

"When we'd go into the villages, and you see the little ones, they didn't know any better, they didn't know what was going on," Frutos said. "I wanted to be their friend, not their enemy. Even though we were in a tank. We had weapons. I wanted to be their friend."



Whenever possible, Frutos would remove his armor and play with the village children, trying to make them less afraid of the war and the death that surrounded them.

"They all reminded me of home," he said. "I come from a big family. It was like I was picking up my brothers or sisters."

Seven months into his tour, Frutos and his comrades were sent on R&R (rest and relaxation) in Hawaii.

"The second we landed and were briefed, I turned around, bought a plane ticket, and headed home,"

he said. "I took a chance, but I figured, what am I going to do here? I just wanted to see my family."

Frutos returned to Hawaii six days later in time to meet his fellow soldiers as they prepared to return to Vietnam, each with a folded piece of paper in their pocket that had a puzzle-like pattern that represented each day of active duty. They'd color in a piece with each day that passed. When their 13 months came to an end, the puzzle spelled "Home."

"What gets to me is the guys that never got to finish theirs," Frutos said.

Frutos was discharged from active duty on May 4, 1971. He returned home unsure of what to do next.

He began coaching Little League, first in Ojai and then Santa Paula, and also volunteered as an umpire, a role he held for more than 40 years. He also spent many years as a member of the League's Board of Trustees, working hand-in-hand with other board members, including Richard Ruiz, to establish a program that provided gloves, uniforms, and other equipment for kids whose families couldn't afford the materials. They also had scholarships available to cover registrations fees.



In September 1974, Frutos began his career with the Santa Paula Elementary School District, working first in maintenance, then as lead custodian, and eventually as outreach consultant, monitoring attendance and academics for students who struggled with both.



In the mid-1980s, Frutos joined the Santa Paula Mercer-Prieto VFW Post 2043, but kept a distance from many of the Post's activities. That changed 10 years later when he became more heavily involved as the Post struggled with aging membership, an issue it continues to face.

Through his work with the school district, Frutos noticed that many of the students didn't know much about the VFW or the experiences of its members.

So he approached the Post commander and school principals with the idea of providing school presentations on Veterans Day and Memorial Day that educate the students about the history of the VFW, of the country, and of their neighbors that stand before them in uniform. It is a program that continues to exist.

Frutos is also active in providing military burials to veterans throughout the county – a service that members of the Mercer-Prieto post provide at no cost to the family.

But his work as a veteran doesn't end there.

Frutos has become a staple in the community's Memorial Day and Veteran's Day ceremonies – ceremonies that always involve participation from Santa Paula's student musicians, vocalists, and volunteers. And in the crowd at each event, proudly standing among the hundreds of attendees, are his wife, Carmen, six children, daughters-in-law, and eight grandchildren.

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LEGACY is a publication of the Ventura County Area Agency on Aging that was established to highlight the life stories of residents throughout Ventura County who continue to make a difference in their community. To view video related to this story, please visit ventura.org/vcaaa.

The Ventura County Area Agency on Aging, an agency of the County of Ventura, is the principal agency in Ventura County charged with the responsibility to promote the development and implementation of a comprehensive coordinated system of care that enables older individuals and their caregivers to live in a community-based setting and to advocate for the needs of those 60 years of age and older in the county, providing leadership and promoting citizen involvement in the planning process as well as in the delivery of services.

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